DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 231 846 TM 830 358

AUTHOR Bonzelaar, Helen
TITLE The Dilemma of the Professional Educator as Ethnographer: Blessing or Curse?
PUB DATE 26 Mar 83
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Ethnography in Education Research Forum (March 26, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Researchers; *Ethics; *Ethnography; Field Studies; High Schools; Moral Issues; Observation; Participation; Perspective Taking; Research Methodology; *Research Problems; Responsibility
IDENTIFIERS *Participant Observation; Research Subject Relationship.

ABSTRACT

In socio-cultural field studies the professional investigator encounters problems which raise questions about the researcher's role and influence in the field. A study investigating how a lower and lower-middle class suburban socio-cultural society and an art teacher influence high school students' assumptions about art, also examines the individual's experience of research as a participant observer. Conflicts of interest concern how much professional leadership activity to engage in while working in the field; when the revelation of self and expertise limit or further the research goal; with whom to associate to gain necessary information; and when the tradeoff of information given is worth an understanding gained. Issues of morality, ethics, and loyalty to research subjects reveal dilemmas presented by participant observation methods, shown in anecdotal examples from the research data. The paradoxical issues--to change or not to change the investigated situation--represent philosophical concerns that perhaps cannot be solved, but nevertheless merit discussion. (CM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED231846

"The Dilemma of the Professional Educator as Ethnographer: Blessing or Curse?"

A Paper Presented
for the
Ethnography in Education
Research Forum

March 26, 1983

Helen Bonzelaar

Calvin College
Grand Rapids, Michigan

TM830 318

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

H. Bonzelaar

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The professional researcher encounters situations in the field which require a judgement about what role to play. Questions like the following arise: In how much professional leadership activity should I engage while working in the field? When does the revelation of self and professional expertise limit or further the goal of research? With whom do I associate to gain necessary information? When is a trade-off of information given worth an understanding gained?

My encounter with these dilemmas occured within an art classroom. The purpose of this paper is to raise questions about conflicts of interest and to discuss my handling them as a novice researcher. No ultimate answers appear safe for direct infusion in another situation.

THE PROBLEM

To improve art instruction in schools, art educators need to increase their understanding of what students understand art to be. Students in a middle class school were heard to evaluate works of art on the basis of what the judge of an art competition might use as a criterion--its technical qualities, form, and expressiveness. Students in a lower middle to lower class school judged art based on what might sell and how faithfully it mirrored nature. Where do these different standards originate? How does socio-economic class correlate with these different standards not only for <u>high art</u>, that which is displayed in art museums and designed to raise human consciousness; but also art in <u>popular</u> culture, the visual artifacts used in everyday life such as the spaces in which people live and the clothes they wear (Chalmers, 1981; Morris, 1975).

Social scientists maintain that the way people perceive and use visual symbols determines ways subcultures perceive works of art. Evidences of taste originate and develop in response to socio-economic conditions (McFee, 1966).

The purpose of the study is to investigate how a lower and lower middle class suburban socio-cultural society and an art teacher influence high school students' implicit assumptions of art. I have attempted to discover relevant data by participant observation for an academic semester. The research looks at what students, faculty, administration, and students' families said and did about art both in and out of school.

SITE

Kettle Junior and Senior High School, the site which I have investigated for my dissertation, represents a lower to lower-middle class mainstream, suburban, public school. The art teacher's background is similar to that of her lower-middle class students. Data remain to be analyzed.

DILEMMAS IN FIELD WORK

The professional investigator encounters problems which raise questions about the researcher's role and influence in the field. It is a given that the research scene changes somewhat because of the participant observer. In this study I adopted what Gold identifies as "participant-as-observer" (in McCall and Simmons, 1969, p. 35). Questions arose when I was asked to assume participant roles of evaluator, surrogate teacher, and information expert. Where does the research itself instigate change that limits or furthers the goal of the study? Sometimes a researcher allows trade-offs, she gives educational assistance which leads to a pay-off resulting in opportunities for new revelation or insight which she in turn takes for her analysis. Included in this category also are ethical, moral, and loyalty issues.

Advice Sought

A teacher asked me as an art educator to evaluate a student's art work. My evaluation could influence what I wanted to see unfold naturally. How the teacher and student evaluated art would lend insight to their standards for art. Refusing the request might lead participants to see me as a "taker" only. At first I ducked the question. When it was repeated, I chose to share, but employed only the teacher's criteria used earlier.

This routine pattern of mimicry began to feel uncomfortable to me, the limited standards employed were too shallow, vague, and incomplete to be me. After documenting a constant pattern of the teacher's and the students' evaluation, I was forced into the new dilemma of comparing two arrangements of the same student's work. The old patterns did not work. I introduced the concept of "negative space" and discovered my effect on the site. The teacher subsequently employed the term three times within the following two observation days. How might I have dodged the request for advice? Notes of the occasion read like this:

> Observational note:
> Yesterday Tom had his stationary design of flowers done with lines. He traced this drawing onto tracing paper according to Mrs. Bo's instructions. The tracing paper was larger than the original drawing which meant that there was more plain space surrounding the floral border motif.
>
> Theoretical note:
> This repetition of blank area repeats the negative space in the interior of the paper. Although the repetition makes a unified design, the traced image has too much negative border - the proportion is wrong.
>
> Observational note:
> Mrs. Bo: "Mrs. B. how would you evaluate Tom's drawing?
> Mrs. B: I inserted something new. I don't know if I should have. I suggested that the negative space around the border on tracing paper is not as strong a proportion as the negative space on the original. There is too much space in the traced presentation.
>
> Observational note: (2 observations later)
> Since I used the term "negative space" earlier I have heard Mrs. Bo use it three times.

Only once in two months following the week when I introduced "negative space" has Mrs. Bo referred to it after I heard her use the term initially. Bogdan and Taylor say, "Where involvement is essential to acceptance, then by all means participate. Where involvement means competition for status, withdraw." Yet they say, "Don't be afraid to let subjects know there are differences between you" (1975, p. 52). Was this research effect damaging to the research?

Another instance caused me to question my personal need to be a teacher and mixed with it is a question about the influence of art masterpieces. Gene always draws science-fiction. Mrs. Bo said of him,

> Gene is extremely inflexible and never tries anything realistic. The mechanical arts teacher and I decided we aren't going to ride him this year. We are both going to let him draw all the space creatures he wants. He does it anyway.

I wondered if the lack of visual stimulus in the art room affected Gene's lack of expansion. I wanted to know if pictures by famous artists might help to develop Gene's visual imagination and wished I had reproductions of masterpieces to show Gene to examine his response. Underlying this also was possibly my personal compulsion to be a teacher. I recorded that ethically I felt "bound to show Gene prints by M. C. Escher or paintings by Rene' Magriette."

Junker quotes an anonymous researcher as informant who states,

> I wish to emphasize that my purpose in answering the questions or in talking...is not to give them (the subjects) information or in any sense to be a teacher or guide, but simply to play the social role which is defined and not entirely by me. It is defined in a large sense by what they think a University person is and by what they think a researcher is...(1960, p. 103).

Schwartz and Schwartz caution investigators to "look for changes derived from active participation...In this role there is increased possibility of affective involvement with the observed so that the observer loses his perspective as an outsider" (in McCall and Simmons, 1969, p. 98). Was the desire to look for change in the students' behavior consistent with goals in this kind of research?

How does the investigator's unconscious motivation influence the way she notes an event and symbolically modifies it in retrospect? Without carefully analyzing data, my intuition is that my desire to teach predominated my concern to research, an affect which I hardly thought beneficial. Fortunately, I did not find the reproductions of masterpieces I wanted to show Gene and later observations support my suspicions that

the art teacher's perception of Gene was correct. His inflexibility rather than his lack of stimuli inhibited his visual expressions.

Schwartz and Schwartz also give advice regarding researcher's emotional responses to observation.

> Since the investigator has control over neither his affective responses nor their effects on his observations, he must contend with his feelings as part of his data. Only by increasing his awareness of them, their bases, and their effects on him will he be able tolcounteract their distorting influences (in McCall and Simmons, 1969, p. 99).

A Pay-off

Sometimes pay-offs did occur as a result of becoming a complete participant and temporarily assuming the teacher's role. Regularly art students complained about the art teacher always telling them what to do. My observations of Mrs. Bo's directive teaching made me wonder why she used so little questioning to instruct. One day Marcy commandeered me to help her draw. When I took ten minutes to ask Marcy questions leading her to discover ways of creating the illusion of space or perspective I set the stage for another jolt. Students frequently both wanted to be told what to do and yet resented being told. It is easier to follow directions dependently than to think independently and inventively; furthermore, that dependent pattern had been established in this art class. At the conclusion of my careful questioning Marcy had inductively established principles for her drawing. Nevertheless, when reporting the incident to Mrs. Bo she claimed I had told her what to do. Curiously, she quickly corrected herself.

The insights as recorded in my notes include personal feelings.

> At first I felt pierced as the teacher often must. Marcy accused me of controlling. It was exactly what I had succeeded in not doing. I felt heartened that Marcy corrected herself so quickly. It revealed her sincere sensitivity to a problem which students in this class resented.

Changing my role to becoming an instructional participant for a time with a student who trusted me opened an opportunity to sense more deeply both these students' relationship with their teacher and the teacher's dilemma. I gained empathy with the

teacher's tightrope in dealing with the insecurities of developing artists. I could weigh these impressions against observations of my student teachers and their cooperating teachers where the struggle for student independence is not always so noted as it was in Mrs. Bo's art classes.

> The disengagement and objectivity that scientific observation seems to require are sought by adopting intellectually a stance like that of a complete observer, but in practice, the field-worker finds himself entering the situation with a burden of many pretenses and a commitment of complete participant activities (Junker, 1960, p. 71).

A Trial Trade-off

Revealing some of oneself as investigator is risky, and may go beyond merely sharing friendship and goodwill. Even data producing situations raise questions. For example, most students became accustomed to seeing me always wearing a 35mm camera around my neck and photographing regularly. Although students inevitably realized when they were the subjects in focus, their overt responses to being photographed soon disappeared. They regularly asked to see the developed pictures to which they responded with further enlightening conversation. This little give and take was a valuable data producing venture.

Nevertheless, it was difficult to gain the confidence of a sometimes hostile group of "tough girls" (teacher's label). These girls, too, scurried to see if their picture was in the latest group of developed photos when I brought them, but resisted being photographed. One of the "tough girls," Sally, never did completely trust my camera and me. She regularly warned her peers whenever I had the camera poised. Although her clique initially made a pact to warn each other, they stopped after some time lapsed. Maybe my revealing to these girls the photographs in a previously completed parallel study put the students at ease and enlisted their assistance for the study. Sharing another study of high school art students was risky, but it revealed that I did not expect these hostile subjects to remain hostile as time progressed (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, p. 48). I also attempted to gain rapport with subjects by establishing some of what they had in

common with me (Bodgan and Taylor, 1975, p. 46). We were both participants in writing a story of their school. Up to that point there seemed to be little we shared even though I frequently talked with them about their subjects of conversation, social events in school, and their art works. Here I attempted not "to display too much knowledge of their situation" or art in general which would make students aware of my presence as a professional and cause them to withdraw (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, p. 46). Possibly it was a socio-cultural difference that students observed by my dress or vocabulary which caused Sally to say that I was "wierd." Although I tried to shed some professorial clothes, only occasionally did I wear blue jeans like the students. Even the old cadillac I drove with its cracked windshield, matched the monstrous hand-me-downs and rusted junkers parked in the student lot.

> There is no other device for excluding biases in social sciences than to face the valuations and to induce them as explicitly stated, specific and sufficiently concretized value premises (Myrdal, 1944, p. 1043).

In retrospect showing these students first the visual-verbal report on another high school seemed the last of several contrived opportunities I took to establish potential "intimate" contact with this black-leather-jacket group of girls. With the exception of Sally, a special education student who was at the time also falling out of rapport with the teacher and suffering from a broken engagement, there were times of openness with these difficult girls.

The other bit of fallout from bringing the earlier study for these girls to see was their conversation about it which the teacher unfortunately overheard. Students noted the thirty-second time series photographs illustrating the former research subjects diligently on task even before the bell signaling the beginning of class. "That doesn't happen here," one student correctly observed within her teacher's hearing. At this second site students sometimes did not bother to get out their art for whole periods. The "tough girls" had spent most of two class periods painting their fingernails.

During the next observation I noted the teacher calling students to task five times. This frequency was unprecedented. Later, however, I observed the teacher spending a whole morning making yarn angels to sell for herself at a fair - activity which was also off-task.

When does an observer's activity fall outside her purpose to collect data? Did my leadership interfer with the research goal to discover what would occur in the site if I had not been there?

An Ethical Issue

To learn students' understanding of popular art I introduced a book illustrating winning rock album covers. One example of "rock art," a photograph of John Lennon and Yoko Ono in the nude, elicited strong, non-verbal, enticing responses from younger students. Sheepish grins and excited whispering revealed some students' attitude toward the subject as representing forbidden territory (The record jacket printed in England had been banned in the United States during the early 1970s). On the other hand some seniors did not see this as a taboo in the contemporary world of Home Box Office and rock movies.

Interjecting art which expresses life with drugs, and the slick, sleek images of our digital world invited responses I might not otherwise have heard. Introducing classical nude figures would not have stimulated a discussion of pornography with the strong emotional quality which rock album covers did. Had I asked for administrative approval for using this book as a research tool would undoubtedly have foreclosed upon my intentions. I introduced new material into the setting. Bogdan and Taylor say that:

> Observers must conduct themselves in such a way that the events that occur during their observations do not significantly differ from those which occur in their absence (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, p. 45).

What controversial issues are excluded from a researcher's tool kit with or without special permission?

CONCLUSIONS

Issues of morality, ethics, and loyalty to research subjects and to the usual participant observation methods present themselves regularly to the professional researcher. I feel like I have trod precariously, yet achieved some ultimate goals of the research. A researcher knows that over time events will change things naturally without her presence. The paradoxical issues, to change or not to change the investigated situation, represent philosophical concerns that perhaps cannot be solved, nevertheless, merit discussion.

REFERENCES

Bogdan, R. and S. J. Taylor. Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods. New York: John Wiley, 1975.

Chalmers, F. G. Art education as ethnology. Studies in Art Education, 1981, 22 3.

Gold, R. L. Roles in Sociological Observation. In G. J. McCall and J. L. Simmons (Eds.). Issues in Participant Observation. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1969.

Hobenstein, R. W. (Ed.). Pathways to Data. Chicago: Aldine, 1970.

Junker, B. H. Field Work. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

McFee, J. K. Society, art, and education. In E. L. Mattil (Ed.). A Seminar in Art Education for Research and Curriculum Development, Project Number V-002, U. S. O. E., 1966.

Morris, J. W. An alternative methodology for researching art attitudes and values. Studies in Art Education, 1975, 17, 1.

Myrdal, G. An American Dilemma. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944.

Schwartz, M. S. and C. G. Schwartz. Problems in Participant Observation. In G. J. McCall and J. L. Simmons (Eds.). Issues in Participant Observation. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1969.